

Carles Puigdemont gambled and failed. The consequences will live on

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How quickly the shine comes off. When on 26 October Carles Puigdemont, Catalonia's separatist president, signalled that he would not call regional elections, thus triggering a unilateral declaration of independence from Spain, his decision took Europe's collective breath away.

Puigdemont's tactics had until that moment served to integrate and mobilise public support, and his leadership was credited with bringing to life the nationalist vision of a Catalan state. But within hours of that declaration, Catalonia came under direct rule from Madrid, and Puigdemont fled to Brussels with four of his cabinet ministers, to the astonishment of many in the region – especially those who had expected him to stand up to Madrid and, at the very least, lead a campaign of civil disobedience.

Puigdemont defended his decision, arguing that he and his colleagues travelled to Belgium to raise their case for statehood at the EU institutions, but this did not prevent newspaper columnists from ridiculing him and cartoonists drawing him hiding out in a box of Belgian chocolates.

The world, mocked FT columnist Robert Shrimsley, had "a new and heroic freedom fighter. De Gaulle, Gandhi, Mandela and now Carles Puigdemont, deposed leader of Catalonia who, as Spain took central control over his region, fled to Brussels and is refusing to return until he has guarantees about his safety. One can only imagine the conversations between the leader in exile and his aides."

One can only imagine, indeed. We shall probably have to wait for Puigdemont's memoirs before we can know exactly what was going on inside his head. Over the course of less than a week, he made two terrible political mistakes.

Puigdemont should, in my opinion, have held his nerve and not unilaterally declared independence, an action that immediately undermined the political legitimacy of the Catalan nationalist movement. But having decided to pull the trigger – something that was guaranteed to provoke Madrid into imposing direct rule – he should have remained in Spain whatever the consequences. I would very much doubt that the Spanish prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, would have been foolish enough to imprison Puigdemont and turn him into a martyr.

Political leadership is about character and example. If such leadership is to mean anything at all, it must stand for principles that are believed in for themselves. A deposed Puigdemont standing up to Madrid for the Catalan cause might have been one of the most dramatic moments in Spain's modern political history, possibly causing further national trauma. But, at the same time, it would have put an end to the destabilising (for the country as whole) dialogue of the deaf between Puigdemont's party and the Madrid government.

Without a crystal ball, we cannot know for certain how it would have played out but my strong impression is that after the backlash from the Spanish government's heavy-handed use of police force against Catalan civilians, the Spanish prime minister was prepared to show a larger degree of flexibility in dealing with the Catalan leadership. Ironically, it was that very same backlash that emboldened Puigdemont into thinking that he had gained the upper hand on Rajoy.

If history is to be made, it requires, more often than not, the taking of big political risks. A statesman, Bismarck once observed, “must wait and listen until he hears the steps of God sounding through events; then leap up and grasp the hem of His garment”. Puigdemont’s tragedy is that when he did hear those footsteps, he panicked and chose to ignore them.

We cannot predict what will happen on 21 December when the Catalans vote at regional elections. Much will depend on how Madrid deals with Puigdemont now that he has turned himself in. But one thing is certain: the consequences of Carles Puigdemont’s failed gamble will live on.